

# As Saudi Arabia Goes, So Goes the GCC

By *Hussein Mousa*

**S**audi Arabia is the largest and most influential member of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), which also includes the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar.

The Saudi high-value food market is the largest and fastest growing in the GCC region, as reflected in U.S. exports. Of the \$833.3 million worth of U.S. agricultural, fish and forest exports to the GCC region in fiscal 2004, \$383.7 million worth went to Saudi Arabia—almost a third in the form of consumer-oriented food products.

As a group, the GCC strives to create a common set of food standards, but it is SASO (the Saudi Arabian Standards Organization) that leads standard setting for the region, greatly influencing GCC procedures.

SASO coordinates activities among different agencies in the Ministry of Commerce that control food product quality and standards within the country. Understanding SASO regulations is therefore key to accessing not only the Saudi market but other GCC markets as well.

## Labeling Is Straightforward

Labels should be in Arabic, or include an Arabic language sticker that does not overlap the original label. Labels must contain this information:

- Specific product name and type of animal, if a meat derivative
- Statement denoting animal feed products

- List of ingredients, in descending order of proportion
- Metric measurements
- Name and address of manufacturer, packer, distributor, importer, exporter or vendor
- Special storage, transportation and preparation instructions
- Additives
- Country of origin
- Shelf life, or
- Date of production, for products with no specific shelf life

Food additives, antioxidants and special diet foods have additional specific labeling requirements.

GCC countries have developed lists of food additives, pesticides and contaminants that are consistent with Codex Alimentarius standards and, to a lesser extent, with European and U.S. standards. These lists are available from SASO.

Samples, when accompanied by a commercial invoice specifying that the products are not for sale, are exempt from Saudi labeling and shelf life regulations. But samples are subject to inspection at ports of entry.

## What About Biotech?

The Saudi government requires that products containing ingredients derived from biotechnology be so labeled (biotech-derived animal products are not allowed).

Besides Arabic labeling that includes a triangle with text reading “contains genetically modified product(s),” the country requires a health certificate from the country of origin stating that the biotech ingredients are approved in the country of origin for human consumption.

For U.S. origin foods, the Saudi government allows certificates from state

departments of agriculture in lieu of those issued by USDA or the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. For U.S. corn and soybean meal, Saudi Arabia accepts USDA’s one-time biotech grains certification statements submitted in 2003, eliminating the need for individual biotech certification for shipments of these products.

The Polymerase Chain Reaction Real Time Method for biotech testing is followed by Saudi Arabia, and a 1-percent threshold is allowed to account for cross contamination.

## Packaging Requirements

Food packaging requirements were set by SASO in 1997. Food-grade packaging must be:

- Clean, free of contaminants and capable of maintaining the integrity of contents while preventing outside contamination, undesirable odors, flavors and tastes
- Impermeable to moisture
- Structurally stable to remain intact during shipping and handling
- Dissimilar from pharmaceutical packaging

## Accompanying Paperwork

Most Saudi food imports enter the country via the ports of Jeddah on the Red Sea or Dammam, on the Persian Gulf. Imports from nearby countries are trucked in.

All imports must have these documents for entry through customs:

- Commercial invoice
- Health certificate from country of origin
- *Halal* slaughter certificate for meat and meat products
- Certificate of origin
- Bill of lading
- Packing list



Imported foodstuffs are inspected and controlled by the Ministry of Commerce at the port of entry, with these exceptions:

- The Ministry of Health requires registration of herbal preparations, health and supplementary foods before they can be marketed. The registration process usually requires about six months, with a \$300 fee.
- Live animals, plants, seeds and animal feeds are inspected by the Ministry of Agriculture.

### Livestock, Poultry Face Restrictions

Saudi meat import regulations prohibit imports of livestock and poultry that have been fed animal protein or treated with growth hormones. These restrictions have sharply reduced imports of U.S. livestock, live poultry, and meat and poultry products.

Health certificates accompanying imported meat products must specify that the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point system was used in processing them.

Saudi Arabia has banned imports of cattle and related products from Washington state because of concerns about bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Imports of live poultry, poultry meat and products have been banned from countries where avian influenza has been detected. Live poultry imports from countries with West Nile virus have also been banned.

### Trademarks Protected

Trademarks must be registered with the Trademark Registration Department through a local agent or lawyer. The application approval process usually takes a month. Application costs run about \$2,000.

The approved trademark is published in the official government Arabic language newspaper Hum Al-Qura. Registration is good for 10 years and can be renewed simply by re-publishing it in the official newspaper. ■

*The author is an agricultural specialist with the FAS Agricultural Trade Office in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Tel. (011-966-1) 482-2197; Fax: (011-966-1) 482-4364; E-mail: fasriyadh@hotmail.com, or Hussein.Mousa@usda.gov*

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